

AR 3320

Nicole James

Learning Circles: Learning Online Together at the Cologne Public Library

Abstract: The Cologne Public Library has offered small, facilitated study groups for online learning, called learning circles, for the past two years. The development of learning circles by Peer 2 Peer University (P2PU) is discussed, as well as the Library's experiences with this learning model. An introduction is given to the Erasmus+ project Learning Circles in Libraries (LCIL).

Keywords: Online learning, peer learning, adult education

Learning Circles (Lerntteams): Gemeinsam online Lernen in der Stadtbibliothek Köln

Zusammenfassung: Die Stadtbibliothek Köln bietet seit zwei Jahren Learning Circles (Lerntteams) an, kleine Lerngruppe die sich treffen um gemeinsam einen Online-Kurs zu absolvieren. Berichtet wird über Peer-2-Peer University (P2PU), die Gründerorganisation von diesem Lernmodel, die Erfahrungen der Stadtbibliothek Köln nach zwei Jahren in der Praxis und die Mitwirkung am Erasmus+ Projekt Learning Circles in Libraries (LCIL).

Schlüsselwörter: Onlinelernen, Peer-Lernen, Erwachsenenbildung

A chance meeting by Dr. Hannelore Vogt, director of the Cologne Public Library, with Philipp Schmidt, director of Learning Innovation at the MIT Media Lab, at a conference in 2017 led to the Cologne Public Library becoming the first public library in Germany to offer learning circles. Philip Schmidt happened to be a co-founder of Peer 2 Peer University (P2PU), a non-profit organization dedicated to bringing free, open, online education to everyone. P2PU had been working with public libraries since 2015 and has since helped to establish hundreds of learning circles around the world. This article will explore how the Cologne Public Library implemented this new learning model, as well as the Library's participation in the Erasmus+ Learning Circles in Libraries (LCIL) project.¹

What exactly are learning circles? In essence, they are small study groups that meet over the course of a few weeks to do an online course together. They were born out of a desire by P2PU, which had been

¹ For further information and resources: <https://www.stadt-koeln.de/leben-in-koeln/stadtbibliothek/a-z/lerntteams-eine-neue-lernmethode-der-stadtbibliothek>.

involved in online education since 2007, to bring online courses to an audience that was not being reached and that could definitely benefit from the many interesting and useful resources available online—namely, the general public, particularly those citizens who were regular users of libraries and those who would benefit from low-threshold course offerings.

There are numerous Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and other online courses available for free, but they tend to reach a specific audience—those already in an education setting. In addition, online learning isn't necessarily barrier free to all—those who are new to or unfamiliar with adult online education, or who do not have the necessary equipment or technological know-how to access and use an online course are not able to benefit from them. Online learning offers so many benefits—flexibility, learning at one's own pace and from the comfort of home. Yet it is also very difficult for many to summon the motivation and discipline to complete an online course alone. In seeking to overcome these limitations, P2PU partnered with the Chicago Public Library in 2015 and created the learning circles. All of the resources required to start and facilitate a learning circle are available open-source and free of charge on P2PU's website.²

What are the advantages of learning circles? These small study groups, comprised of people who have a shared interest in a subject, proved to have many advantages over purely online learning. They offered a social learning experience in the local community and provided the support, encouragement, and accountability from working together with others in a group. They also harness the benefits and strength of peer learning. There are now hundreds of learning circles operating in libraries and other institutions in the USA, eastern Africa, Asia and now, increasingly, in Europe. There are learning circles on a variety of topics, from languages, to public speaking, resumes, computing skills, storytelling, and many more.

What does a learning circle look like in practice? A small group of 6-12 people meet together in a library or other setting over a course of 6-8 weeks to jointly complete an online course. The sessions last 90-120 minutes and are comprised of coursework, discussion, and feedback. The key is that peer-learning is emphasized. The courses are moderated by facilitators, either library staff or volunteers, but not subject-experts or instructors. The online course itself comprises the expert content. The participants have the time during the session to explore the topic, discuss issues, do assignments and if there are questions, assist each other in finding an answer.

The Cologne Public Library embraced learning circles because they promote the Library's mission of knowledge transfer. In the preface to the Library's 2018 annual report, Library director Dr. Hannelore Vogt quotes Confucius: „Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I will understand.“ The Library has a strong culture of providing the technology, equipment and framework to experiment and try new subjects and technologies. There are many opportunities for creative learning and

² www.p2pu.org.

experimentation at the library, from using the 3-D printer, to programming robots, using the Overlock sewing machine or playing the electric guitar, in addition to the numerous workshops offered for all ages on digital technology and other subjects.

Promoting the Library as a „third place“ is an important component of the Library’s mission, and learning circles do just that by utilizing the library as a vital meeting space for people to connect. The learning circles are a new form of participatory adult learning and another example of providing the space, equipment and framework to allow users to work together in a group setting and explore new terrain, in this case online learning, together.

The Library has many digital offerings available online, from databases to languages courses, to online newspapers and magazines. The learning circles provided an opportunity to showcase these online resources. It was a fortuitous coincidence that the start of the learning circles coincided with the addition of the Lynda online video courses to the Library’s databases. The learning circles provided a perfect opportunity to expand promotion and awareness of this new addition to the Library’s digital portfolio.

How did the Library decide which courses to offer? The Cologne Public Library formed a small staff team to research online courses that were available in German and develop the learning circle concept for the Library. The online courses had to meet the criteria of being free, in German, of interest to the general public and able to be completed in 6-8 weeks. Available online courses were curated and 21 courses selected that met the criteria of being free, in German and suitable to be completed in approximately six weeks.

In deciding exactly which courses to offer, the Library used the “Q method”, as the course selection method is called by P2PU. Library users are presented a list of possible courses on a variety of topics and asked to vote on their favorites. This process was especially appealing, as it allowed the Library to ascertain the users’ likes and offer something that was truly of interest to the majority of the respondents. This course survey took place over a few weeks at the Central Library. The twenty-one courses covered the topics of computing, personal development, art and culture, business and finance, history and the environment. Patrons placed heart stickers next to their preferred courses. In the end there were a total of 446 votes, the top selections being courses on time management, overcoming procrastination, drawing, photography, finance and art history.

The course with the most votes, Time Management and Overcoming Procrastination was offered first in October 2017. Since then six other courses have followed on photography, drawing, Bullet Journaling, art history, finance, and climate change. Several courses were from Lynda, others were from online course providers and one, Bullet Journaling, was comprised of Youtube videos.

Introducing and explaining this new learning model was challenging. There was much discussion as to what to call the learning circles in German. A term was wanted that carried the same connotation of peer and group learning. Lernteam, or “learning team”, was selected as the best option. An abridged version of the P2PU Facilitator Handbook was translated into German as well.

The courses have been facilitated by library staff. Originally it was planned to have volunteers take over as facilitators, but for now it has proved more efficient to have library staff moderate the courses. Organizing the learning circles does require some staff time. The meeting rooms have to be booked, advertising arranged and registrations managed. The weekly sessions do require some planning as well, to ensure that the course content can be covered in the amount of time allotted.

The learning circles at the Cologne Public Library have followed the format suggested by P2PU: courses run for 4-6 weeks and last from 90-120 minutes. Generally half the course time is devoted to watching the online videos and half to doing coursework and for discussion. A nice feature of the P2PU model is the Plus/ Delta segment: during each session participants are asked what they particularly liked about the course and what they would like to improve or change. The learning circles are very democratic.

Remember—there is no teacher. The facilitator guides the discussions and keeps things organized. The course participants can decide what they would like to focus on or spend their time discussing. If there is a question, the facilitator encourages the participants to seek input from the other participants or look for answers together.

In order to more quickly develop a sense of community, a decision was made to implement the use of the informal „you“, or „Du“ in the very first group meeting. This is not necessarily the norm in Germany, but it has gone over well with the participants. Nametags are provided for the first couple of meetings to make learning names easier. These steps really do seem to help in breaking down the barriers and developing a group identity among the participants. Another feature of the learning circles are the emails that go out to the group members each week from the facilitator summarizing what was done during the class, listing any “homework” and reminding of the next meeting date.

The response to the learning circles has been very positive and attendance has been moderate to good. The majority of the participants really enjoy this particular learning format. Average attendance has been ca. 8-11 participants at the first session, settling in at half that number over the next weeks, resulting in approximately 6-8 participants for each learning circle. This group size is ideal for discussion and allows enough time for everyone to fully participate. The courses have attracted a range of participants with different levels of experience in the topics and different motivations for attending the courses. The age range has been from the early 20s to mid-50s. A few patrons have even participated in more than one learning circle. The feedback from participants shows that the discussion and exchange with others is

highly valued. The informal and friendly atmosphere is also appreciated. The respondents found that having set meeting times motivating, and the majority say that they are interested in participating in other learning circles.

However, it is still proving difficult to get the concept of a facilitator-led, group-focused class across to all participants. Some still expect a speaker or instructor. Interestingly, very few of the participants have wanted to do any of the online coursework at home. Almost all have preferred to do the bulk of the online coursework together in class. Most say that it is a lack of motivation and time that prevents them from doing the online course at home.

Adult education is an important issue in many countries. The Cologne Public Library is part of the three-year Erasmus+ Learning Circles in Libraries (LCIL) project, which runs from September 2018 – August 2021. The lead organization is the Information Society Development Foundation (FRSI)³ in Warsaw (Poland). Other members include the Biblioteca Lúcio Craveiro da Silva in Braga (Portugal), the Progress Foundation in Bucharest (Romania) and the Association of Finnish eLearning Centres in Tampere (Finland), as well as P2PU.

The LCIL project will train librarians in the participating countries to be learning circle facilitators, with the goal of having numerous learning circles established in each of the countries. Another goal is to compile a curated list of the most useful online courses available in each of the countries that will be available in an online database on P2PU's website. A particular target audience for this project is adults who have rarely or never partaken in any form of adult education, or adults who are seeking to gain qualifications or increase their knowledge in certain subjects. The hope is to promote not only lifelong learning, but social learning as well, in the participating countries.

The project consists of six Intellectual Outputs (IO):

- IO1 is a white paper that will be released at the end of 2019 that is an analysis of the state of adult online education in the LCIL member countries;
- IO2 is the creation of an online database consisting of a curated list of courses appropriate for learning circles;
- IO3 will take place in 2020 and consists of a training program for supertrainers and facilitators to occur in each of the member countries;
- IO4 is the development of digital assets for educators and the cultural adaptation of P2PU resources for the P2PU website;
- IO5 is the creation of an online course for adults on online learning;
- IO6 is the outreach, promotion and support of learning circles in the member countries.

While the full white paper, "Real Opportunities for Adult Online Education", has not yet been released, included below are the conclusion and recommendations from the Germany portion of the paper, to better give a context to the role that learning circles can play in this country.

³ Information Society Development Foundation (FRSI) (2019): Real Opportunities for Adult Online Education.

Adult education and continuing education and training (Weiterbildung) is important for modern society, and there is a variety of concepts, resources, initiatives and funding policies on national, regional and local levels. The adult education centres (Volkshochschulen), in particular, play a vital role in providing adult education opportunities.

People learn for professional development and personal interest. As there is such a variety of programmes, providers and internet resources, it is sometimes difficult for them to find suitable learning resources and they need orientation, information and support.

The unemployed and those with less formal education are less likely to participate in online learning than those who are employed and more highly qualified. Support programmes and initiatives exist for various disadvantaged groups in society, yet effectively reaching and involving the unemployed and those with less formal education can be difficult.

Providing information to those who are not able to cope with the variety of learning opportunities, and offering an opportunity for people to talk about what they have learnt seems to be a good approach for all sorts of learning activities.

The following are the recommendations for libraries, educational institutions and policy makers in Germany:

Public libraries should

- join in the efforts of other institutions and initiatives to make online learning an option for everyone, providing information and access to online resources, both for professional development and personal interest, for those who seek to learn outside of formal education and employer-sponsored training.
- make efforts to reach a wide variety of people, if possible those who are disadvantaged in one way or another. As some people may not have much time or money and may not be able to commit themselves over a long period of time, librarians should keep in mind that a low-threshold approach can encourage people to join in.
- increase cooperation between public libraries and adult education centres in order to create learning infrastructures.
- advocate increasing the use of blended learning in adult education. The combination of both traditional and online learning needs to become more broadly established."

The learning circles at the Cologne Public Library will continue in 2020, with four to six sessions planned.

The Berlin Central and Regional Library started offering learning circles in 2019. Other German public libraries will hopefully follow suite, particularly after facilitator trainings are offered for librarians as part of the Erasmus+ LCIL project.



Nicole James
Stadtbibliothek Köln
Josef-Haubrich-Hof 1
D-50676 Köln
james@stbib-koeln.de